



ESL MiniConference

Following Suggestive Topics The Infusion of Data on Native American Indians in a Writing Class

There is an interaction between teachers and students which can feed the motivation levels of each. A few weeks ago, at nearly the peak of autumn colors on our campus, I led my writing class on a five minute stroll from the classroom over to the student union, where I had noticed that morning there was a new display of watercolors by Arthur Short Bull (<http://www.dawnhawk.org>), a Lakota Sioux Indian. The students in this writing course are from China, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Peru, South Korea, and Panama. We spent about 10 minutes viewing the art, and then walked back to the classroom, where I asked these ESL learners to describe their impressions in writing.

I was interested to read that many of them were intrigued by the scenes and moods in the paintings of Arthur Short Bull, and several students wished they knew more about Native American Indians.

My next move was to introduce them to a short story, "The Man to Send Rainclouds," by one of my favorite authors, Leslie Marmon Silko. I had first read this story in 1984, with high school students at the Kickapoo Indian Reservation in northeast Kansas, my first teaching job outside the university, when I was months from receiving my masters in TESL and starting my international travels.

Back in December of 1983, when she heard I would be teaching at the Kickapoo school, a linguistics classmate of mine, Lori Orser Weston, had suggested to me that I obtain two books: "The Man to Send Rainclouds" (an anthology of stories and poems by young American Indian authors, featuring the title story, by Leslie Silko) and "Ceremony," one of Silko's first novels, which was relatively new at that time.

Those two suggestions were pivotal in what turned out to be a wonderful teaching and learning experience for me. I read the short stories with the sophomores; the juniors and I read Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," and the seniors read "Ceremony." Later, the sophomores created a play which they called "The Rez," depicting a storyline somewhat akin to the path of Tayo, the main character in the

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Silko novel.

The positive interactions which I enjoyed in the spring of 1984 with the students at Kickapoo Nation School have remained with me as helpful influences throughout my teaching career. I visited the reservation three years later, a guest of one of my students who had married and had two children by that time.

Many years passed before I had the chance to visit again, early in January of 2005, when I called ahead and arranged to visit one of the members of the 1984 junior class, also on the phone getting a chance to speak with one of his aunts, who were both still paraeducators at the school just as they had been when I taught there. My conversation with their nephew the day I arrived was short--the weather had slowed me down getting there and he had only a few minutes before he had to leave for work--but very gratifying for me. He told me that most of the reading he did these days was of policy manuals at work, but that he had once noticed the Kesey book on display at a store and thought to himself, "I read that book."

Anyway, it was a great spring term at the Kickapoo school for me in 1984, and the stories of Leslie Silko had everything to do with that. I made an effort to get her to come to speak at their graduation in late May--I found a phone number and left several messages before speaking to her mother, who relayed the request and later informed me that her daughter had other commitments for the dates we needed.

Now, in mid-fall of 2007, I brought that first short story to my ESL students and hoped they would enjoy it, too. In addition, I shared with them much of the section in James Banks' "**Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives**" in which he addresses issues relevant to Native American Indians, including the solid historical perspective which he contributes.

Then, about the same time, I noticed one of very few little posters around campus advertising an upcoming showing of "**In Whose Honor?**," a documentary from the 1990s which explains the origins of protests against sports mascots which trivialize Indian culture. It was a free showing of the movie, and on a big screen, so I offered my students extra points for attending, which more than half of them took me up on. It was neat seeing everybody in this different context, outside of classtime, and it inspired me when I realized how seriously these students were taking this topic.

I got up early in the morning the day after the movie, knowing I wanted

to prepare a special learning experience for these amazing students of mine. What I ended up doing was the following series of activities, which took a full 75 minute class period.

Activity One: Contextualizing the Story of Sakagawea

Divide the students into three groups:

GROUP A studies information about the Louisiana Purchase, using the [World Book Online](#) site, including maps.

GROUP B studies information about the Lewis and Clark expedition, using the [World Book Online](#) site, including maps.

GROUP C studies information about the life of Sacagawea, using information on [PBS Online](#).

This is an extended "jigsaw" activity, and jigsawing is generally considered one of Bob Slavin's great collection of cooperative learning activities, but the procedure was first described by Aronson and Patnoe in 1997, in a book titled "[The jigsaw classroom: Building cooperation in the classroom](#)" (Longman).

Activity One: Part B

Now each group stands in front of the classroom to share the key points from the information they have been reading, studying, and discussing. (We were very fortunate in that our classroom has a number of neat standing maps, including one that shows how the Louisiana Purchase changed the size of the United States of America.

Activity Two: A Play from Pro Lingua

I've mentioned [Pro Lingua Associates](#) in other reports on the ESL MiniConference. This time, I am highlighting their collection of plays for ESL students, "Celebrating American Heroes" (Siebert, 2000), and one of the plays which they have made available online as a sample for free download, "[Crossing the Continent to the Pacific](#)," which is the story of Sacagawea's crucial role in the Lewis and Clark expedition.

These plays are great because, in addition to the different roles and the narrator's voice, there are lines for a Greek-style chorus, which can be spoken in unison by all the students at once, and which tend to crystalize and repeat the main ideas.

Because we had nested the play within its historical context through the jigsaw activities on the Louisiana Purchase, Lewis and Clark, and

Sacagawea, it seemed like the students really understood the experience more fully. Several of them thanked me after the class period for helping them to understand this important story, and others have expressed gratitude, in various writings and essays, for drawing their attention to information about Native American Indians.

I hope this description of one of the "topical riffs" in one of my ESL classes is useful to other teachers, as an example of what can happen if we are sensitive to opportunities to infuse real-world data into typical ESL curricula.

On the morning that I took my students to see that artwork, I had been planning something completely different for the class. But, while trying to hurry through the Union to bring together materials for what I was planning to teach, I ran into a colleague from another department, and felt obliged to engage in a five-minute conversation about topics of mutual interest. That "interruption" turned my head, and, as I walked towards the exit my eyes happened upon the new display in a little gallery there.

It's funny because several weeks later, in the early evening on the day of the Sacagawea lesson, I found myself talking about the Louisiana Purchase with a citizen of France, who said French history records Napoleon Bonaparte as arguing that "there was no future in America," and we smiled and laughed together.

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